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MEMORANDUM

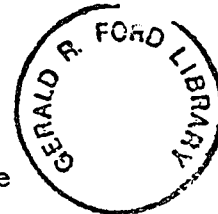
NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

3724-X

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August 28, 1974

MEMORANDUM FOR: SECRETARY KISSINGER
FROM: W. R. Smyser
SUBJECT: Meaning of Le Duc Tho's Latest Message



As I told you in my memorandum of yesterday, I find Le Duc Tho's latest message (Tab A) very tough. I have reviewed the file and find no message to equal its tone.

The following points are of particular interest:

-- Tho levels a very strong attack at the new President, suggesting that there will be no honeymoon there. He also makes a thinly veiled threat, claiming that President Nixon lost office because of Vietnam and that the same could happen to President Ford.

-- Tho also uses some unprecedented language about yourself. He says that you have "betrayed your signature and your commitment." He ties this to your statements that U.S. policy in South Vietnam was unchanged and that the Paris Agreement had provided a new basis for an American role, as well as to your efforts to get aid for the GVN. Earlier in June, Tho had complained about your statements minimizing the importance of the "understandings".

-- There is no hint of any desire or readiness to talk right now, although Tho says that the DRV will be prepared to settle outstanding questions "together with the United States side" if we give up our policy.

I think we need to look at the implications of this message in terms of basic policy and in terms of preserving the asset represented by your particular channel.

Basic Policy

Tho's message appears to herald or perhaps confirm a North Vietnamese policy decision to go the military route, at least for a while. This decision

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DECLASSIFIED
E.O. 12958, Sec. 3.5
NSC Memo, 11/24/98, State Dept. Guidelines
By KOH, NARA, Date 2/10/02

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is also reflected in their recent attacks and in an intelligence report we have just had that they will now try to create American casualties.

A study done for INR by Fred Greene (Tab B) suggests that we will now see a "qualitatively different endeavor, marked by an unrelenting continuation of a comparatively high level of violence on a year-round basis."

If this analysis is correct, the North Vietnamese may have decided to change the objective realities in South Vietnam before they re-engage you or have the PRG re-engage the GVN for serious discussions. They may feel they have found the formula: a sustained level of attack sufficient to erode the GVN without provoking us, combined with efforts to reduce our aid.

Further, if this analysis is correct, there is little we can do to dissuade them except by pressing the GVN to accept Hanoi's interpretation of the political accords or by resuming the JEC talks and signing an agreement. I doubt that either is feasible, so our only option may be to try to prevent Hanoi from changing the objective realities.

Your Channel

I see little in your message that might have provoked Tho's outburst, except perhaps your reference to "American honor" (this always disturbs Tho) or your firm assurance that Mr. Ford would continue Mr. Nixon's policies. Your message is actually quite forthcoming in offering a new relationship. This suggests that Tho's response was motivated by basic policy considerations and not by what you had said.

We cannot ignore, however, Tho's suggestion that you broke faith when you denigrated the "understandings". I thought your public statements should have taken care of this, since you clearly related our attitude on the "understandings" to Hanoi's failure to comply even with the formal agreement. But in the future we may want to take some opportunity to deal with this in a message.

You have often heard me (and others) say that we did not want your channel to be converted into an instrument that would legitimize Hanoi's land-grabbing by instituting cease-fires when they had run out of steam. By the same token, I would recommend against trying to use your channel to bridge what may right now be an unbridgeable gap. I would prefer, as I indicated yesterday, to wait for at least several weeks and then to seize

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some opportunity (perhaps the release of Emmet Kay, if he is released) to restart the dialogue on our own tack. This may still not get us very far, since we have our own complaints to register -- as on the ICCS -- and since Hanoi may see no promise now in dealing with you, but it will give us further chances to test the mood in Hanoi regarding South Vietnam and your channel.

Where do we go from here?

I would like to use Fred Greene's study to have State provoke some new estimates from DOD and CIA about Hanoi's intentions and about South Vietnamese aid requirements in the light of those intentions. Bill Hyland agrees with us, and I think State should do it. On the other hand, I would like to hold off on a reply to Le Duc Tho until we get a better handle than the message he has just sent us.

RECOMMENDATION:

a. That you authorize us to ask the State Department to get DOD and CIA comments on Dr. Greene's paper, and also to get DOD estimates of what this might do to our aid requirements.

Approve / Disapprove

b. That we hold off replying to Le Duc Tho until we see a better opportunity to start the dialogue again on a different basis.

Approve / Disapprove

